2. Similarities and differences in family dialogue

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Do descendants of Nazi perpetrators and descendants of survivors of the Shoah have similar problems? This question is one being raised more and more frequently in academic discourse and in everyday life. So far, responses to it have had a tendency either to equate the two, a position expressed in an article by Mona Weissmark et al (1993), or to vehemently reject any possible similarities. A growing number of self-help groups, set up to provide a forum for descendants from different types of families to talk about their family past and the suffering it causes them, struggle between an open and sometimes aggressive dialogue about the differences and dealing with them in a harmonizing way (Dan Bar-On 1995b).

At first glance, similarities do emerge in a comparison of how Jewish families, in which the grandparents either survived the Shoah, or managed to flee Germany in time, deal with their traumatic past under National Socialism and how families, in which the grandparents were either Nazi perpetrators or active National Socialists, deal with their past. Whereas the way the first generation deals with the past differs significantly depending on whether they were among the victims, perpetrators or accomplices (cf. Section 2.1.1), descendants of both families of victims and families of perpetrators exhibit the following symptoms: blocking out information about the family past, fear of extermination, separation anxiety, guilt feelings, impeded separation-individuation process, and acting out the past in fantasies and psychosomatic symptoms. In addition, similar mechanisms can be observed in the inner-family dynamics within families of those who were persecuted and within families of persecutors. The silence surrounding the past, that has institutionalized itself within perpetrator families, also extends to families of those who were persecuted (Danieli, 1982). Moreover, in both kinds of families, one may observe the tremendous impact of family secrets (Karpel, 1980), as well as family members obstructing each other in any attempt to address themes relating to the past, accusations that render family dialogue impossible, an institutionalization of family myths (Ferreira, 1963) to circumvent conflict within the family, and a bound family system (Stierlin, 1981) resulting from a problematic past.

Behind these manifest similarities on a superficial level, however, lies the level of the latent deep structure, which is different in each case depending on the experiences in the family past. In other words, no matter how strong the superficial similarities, their function within the family system, and, more specifically, their psychological impact on individual family members differ based on the differences in the family pasts.

In survivor families, the silence of the grandparents about their experiences is connected to completely different problems and motives than the silence of grandparents who were implicated in Nazi crimes. A grandmother who survived the ghetto and the death camp is not denying the persecution in her past if she does not speak about it, whereas this certainly is the case when Nazi perpetrators or accomplices remain silent. If she does not articulate this part of her past, one of her reasons for choosing not to do so is an attempt to protect her children and grandchildren from the fantasies and nightmares that haunt her. Survivors very often remain silent to spare their children the burden that weighs so heavily on them and to avoid exposing others to their painful experiences (Danieli, 1982). In contrast, a grandfather and grandmother or parents who were implicated in Nazi crimes primarily keep silent and deny the past to protect themselves from accusation or loss of affection. Similarly, common reactions found in children or grandchildren of survivors are motivated by different causes than those found in descendants of perpetrators. Examples of such reactions include withdrawing from the horror depicted in survivors' narrations of persecution and killing, failing to grasp the full meaning of certain details of the experience, or even repeatedly forgetting the information that has been communicated to them. These self-protective responses are an attempt to ward off very different pressures than those that children or grandchildren in perpetrator families are trying to evade, even if they use similar methods of self-protection. Children and grandchildren of survivors do not want to imagine their parents and grandparents in situations where attempts were made to rob them of their human dignity and where they were helpless to prevent the humiliation and murder of other people, such as their parents, siblings or even their own children. Another reason that they resist knowing and realizing what their grandparents or parents suffered is because they feel guilty for not being able to relieve them of this suffering or for not having endured this suffering themselves. These guilt feelings "include the pressure to compensate parents with naches (happiness) for their suffering through accomplishment; a desire to protect and care for parents; a deep sadness and pain awakened by Holocaust memories; and feelings of powerlessness to undo the Holocaust for their parents" (Klein-Parker 1988, p. 208). In contrast, descendants of Nazi perpetrators are protecting themselves from having to realize the cruel deeds, lack of guilt feelings, emotional coldness and racism and anti-Semitism that continue unabated to this day in their closest reference individuals. And they are also trying to defend themselves against both guilt feelings and fear that their grandparents or parents will murder them or classify them as *lebensunwert* (a Nazi term meaning "unworthy of life").

A fear of being murdered that in some cases intensifies into a genuine **fear of extermination** is something we find in children and grandchildren of both perpetrators and survivors. Fear of extermination in children and grand-

children of perpetrators tends to relate to an unconscious fantasy of being murdered by their own parents (cf. Kestenberg/Kestenberg 1987; Rosenthal/Bar-On 1992), while the potential threat that children of survivors feel tends to be a general anxiety towards the extra-familial and non-Jewish world[11]. In descendants of perpetrators, we also observe a fear of being considered "unworthy of life". Thus, for instance, the daughter of a Nazi euthanasia physician felt this fear as a child in connection with her father and concealed her shortsightedness from him for this reason (Rosenthal/Bar-On 1992). As a child, she had to witness her father throwing her younger brother, a mere baby at the time, into a swimming pool as a test aimed at dispelling his father's doubts of the child's "racial purity". Children and grandchildren of perpetrators also express fears of being murdered by their parents or grandparents if they attempt to expose the family past. A grandson of a Nazi perpetrator, who talked to his grandfather, trying to motivate him to admit his crimes with a certain amount of success, barricaded himself in his room the night of the conversation. He was tormented by the fantasy that his grandfather might shoot him because he was on to his past or was beginning to dissolve the bonds of loyalty he felt towards his grandfather. In another of the families we interviewed, a son of a perpetrator has had a recurring dream since childhood that he is being choked to death by unknown men who sneak up behind him soundlessly. Just a few years before our interview, his father told him that he *"always keeps a length of wire with him to throttle the enemy silently from behind, like a sentry for example"*. His son also imagines taking part in a special duty operation with his father and being murdered by him because he has proven unsuitable for the task. He knows for a fact that rather than leave wounded comrades in enemy territory, his father and his unit murdered them instead. In contrast, descendants of survivors often become afraid in situations that they - often unconsciously - associate with the persecution in their relatives' past. For instance, one hears of them becoming mortally afraid of being gassed when they enter unknown or confined spaces. The grandson in the Goldstern family presented below suffers from a phobia of heights, of being pushed down from somewhere high. In the ghetto, his grandmother had to witness her girlfriend being thrown out of a window by a German.

The separation anxiety that may be observed also differs significantly in all three generations if we are comparing families of survivors and those of Nazi perpetrators. While in families of survivors, anticipated separations trigger deeply-felt mortal fears on both sides, by the abandoner and the abandoned (Barocas & Barocas 1979); with perpetrators and their relatives, an impending separation from the family triggers a fear of their crimes being exposed and of the emotional consequences that may result from this. For

11 For more on fear of persecution or extermination in the third generation, cf. Ahlheim (1985); Rosenthal, P.A. / Rosenthal, S. (1980).

survivors, present-day separations that do actually occur reactivate their memory of the separation they experienced from family members whom they lost in the Shoah (Shiryon 1988, p. 241). When descendants of Nazi perpetrators separate or distance themselves from their parents or grandparents, the latter become afraid that their descendants might now begin to ask questions and discover new perspectives outside of the family that could threaten the family myth.

A further phenomenon common to families of perpetrators and families of victims is the bond that the second and third generation feel to their family of origin, one which often considerably impedes their **separation-individuation process**. Descendants of survivors often assume the caretaker role in their families and learn to look after their parents, suppressing their own needs in the process, especially their conflicts and desires to separate during adolescence, and their aggressions towards their parents. No detailed description of the disorders in their separation-individuation process is needed here, as they are well-documented in clinical case analyses (Barocas & Barocas 1979; Davidson 1980; Freyberg 1980). Bar-On's interviews with children of Nazi perpetrators (1989) indicate that they tend to either have strong bonds to their parents and thus to deny or dispute their Nazi past, or to completely break off contact with their parents and completely reject them. We can also interpret this disassociation from their parents, often accompanied by self-hatred, as a form of bond to their parents. Their separation-individuation process is impeded by their concerted effort to be different than their parents, to reject or deny any possible similarities in themselves, to lead a different life and above all to suppress any desire to have contact with their parents. Our analyses, which focus more on family dynamics than on individual psychodynamics, indicate that where there are a number of children in both families of perpetrators and of survivors, different roles are allocated to each child: for example, one child assumes the position of the parents' bound delegate[12], while another leaves the family and takes on the role of the accuser. Another common pattern is that of a very bound family structure in the children's and grandchildren's generation in conjunction with an exclusion or avoiding of contact with the grandparents' generation[13]. One of the functions this serves is that described by E. Sperling (1979, p. 211) of "not being unfaithful to the past by not coming to terms with it". By keeping contact to the grandparents to a minimum, an attempt is made to maintain the illusion of being a good family nonetheless, of not threatening the family myths or, worse still, airing the family secrets.

Our case analyses show clearly that silence and family secrets as well as family myths constitute some of the most effective mechanisms of ensuring

12 Yael Danieli's clinical experience (1982) is that the firstborn child generally takes on this role in families of survivors.

13 Cf. the Kaufmann family; cf. Chapter 4.3.

the sustained impact of a problematic family past. This is true in families of survivors, perpetrators and Nazi accomplices. This can be more generally formulated as: the more closed or guarded the family dialogue, or the greater the attempt to make a secret of or whitewash the past, the more sustained the impact of the family past will be on the second or third generation (Bar-On, 1995, Danieli, 1993, Sigal et. al., 1973). Our biographical case reconstructions indicate that these subsequent generations often unconsciously suffer from extremely detailed fantasies relating to undisclosed family history or family secrets. It emerged very clearly in the families we analysed that these fantasies correspond quite remarkably in their content to the specific experiences in the parts of the family history that are denied.

An aura of secrecy and shame hangs over survivor families where crucial information and experiences are not passed down to subsequent generations. "The children develop fearful and embarrassed attitudes to the `family secret' and often weave horrifying fantasies about what was done to their parents and how they survived" (Davidson, 1980, p. 19). The children and grandchildren of Nazi perpetrators, on the other hand, are preoccupied with fantasies from the perspective of the perpetrators as well as with conceptions about their crimes. At the same time - unlike the descendants of survivors - they keep trying to soothe themselves by telling themselves that these fantasies are not remotely grounded in reality or are not connected to the family history. However, in the case of some children and grandchildren, far from alleviating their unease, these attempts to soothe themselves make them begin to doubt their own perception and fear that they suffer from psychotic delusions.

The respective family secrets differ both in content and in function within families of survivors and those of Nazi perpetrators or accomplices. The fantasies created around these secrets by the subsequent generations are also correspondingly different in content. These fantasies revolve either around the powerlessness and suffering experienced by a survivor, or around the crimes of a perpetrator. Moreover, the psychological dynamics differ in each case, too. Examples from the Sonntag and Steinberg families offer some preliminary insights into these differences. Both in the Sonntag family, where the grandfather was very likely implicated in Nazi crimes, and in the Steinberg family, where the grandmother survived the Shoah, the children and grandchildren only have access to certain information and fill in the gaps with their fantasies. The creation of such fantasies demonstrates how, despite narrative silence, the grandparents' experiences and deeds are handed down on a latent level.

In the Sonntag family (Chapter 5.2), the grandfather, whom our archival research shows may well have been involved in constructing crematoria in concentration camps, wonders how there could still have been so many corpses left after 1945, arguing that they tried to burn them all. His whereabouts during the war, and the crimes he was implicated in, remain a secret

within his family. His son, however, continues to ask "burning" questions with regard to his own life story; he is preoccupied with whether he could bring himself to shoot people or even burn women and children locked inside a church building. He subsequently concludes that, though he does not think he could, he *"wouldn't put my hand in the fire to prove"* that he would not be. He exonerates the perpetrators of such crimes mainly by blaming them on the victims. One of the main arguments he puts forward is that, in some places, the victims themselves were to blame for the Nazis murdering their entire population, because they aided and abetted the partisans. On the other hand, in the Steinberg family (cf. Zilberman & Rosenthal 1994), the interview with the mother, who was tortured as a political prisoner and incarcerated in several concentration camps, is riddled with unspecified allusions to repeated abuse and rape. In her own narrative, the daughter, who is extremely close to her mother, makes veiled allegations against her. On an unconscious level, she is haunted by the fantasy that her mother prostituted herself to the Nazis.

Thus, we have the son of an alleged perpetrator tormenting himself with the question of his own potential to perpetrate such crimes, and exonerating the real perpetrators in the process and, instead, blaming the victims for the crimes committed against them. In contrast, the daughter of a survivor struggles with suppressed accusations against her mother and with the guilt feelings that these generate in her. These scenarios clearly illustrate the way that a pattern, that exists in the first generation, is handed down to later generations. While the real perpetrators attempt to deflect responsibility from themselves by blaming the victims (Rosenthal, 1992), survivors continue to be plagued with guilt for having survived, and repeatedly call into question having abandoned their parents, or their failure to help others in certain situations, or else torment themselves by asking why they only thought of themselves during "selection procedures", instead of thinking of those who were being sent to their death in the gas chamber. Their children take on these feelings of guilt at having survived, too, and feel guilty for not being able to make their parents' past go away, as well (cf. Danieli 1980).

Our analyses of family dialogues also show that coalitions of family members blocking a discussion of a family past, that weighs very heavily on all of them, can be a decisive precondition for a closed or bound family system being formed and maintained. Thus, the more comprehensive the silence about the past, the more closed the respective family system. The bound family closes itself off from the outside world, while at the same time permitting almost no limits to be set between individual family members. These families, of which the Seewald family discussed in Chapter 5.3 is an example, avoid conflicts, cultivate a harmonizing style of communication, and place large parts of the family history under taboo (Wirsching & Stierlin 1982, p. 123ff.). To avoid having to address the theme of threatening parts of their past, bound families often tend to create family myths (Ferreira 1967): unquestioned justi-

fication strategies shared by all the family members, a collectively maintained belief that factually diverges from reality.

A comparison of survivor and perpetrator families also illustrates structural differences with regard to the content of family myths. In survivor families, the construction of and identification with such myths focuses on the themes of "strength" and "resistance" (such as the fantasy that the grandfather boxed an SS officer). In families with a Nazi past, this takes on the form of emphasizing the victimhood of the family members. In the Seewald family below (Chapter 5.3), we will examine the fabricating interpretation, complete with detailed fantasy images, of how the grandfather was a victim in a prisoner of war camp. A striking feature in Jewish families is the fact that children and grandchildren of grandparents who both survived concentration or extermination camps take a particular interest in finding parts of their family history related to "fighting". The Goldstern family, for instance, (Chapter 2.3) identify strongly with the grandmother's brother, who was killed in action during the War of Independence in Israel. An analysis of this family dialogue illustrates that identifying with this great-uncle serves as a repair strategy that attempts to heal intense feelings of powerlessness. While on a superficial level, this phenomenon may be explained as an expression of collective interpretation patterns institutionalized in Israel, it is also found in families of Jewish survivors living in Germany.

In non-Jewish German families, one repeatedly comes upon the myth of the "clean" soldier who helped enemy civilians or even treated prisoners of war with respect, maintaining a sense of justice in the midst of injustice. This belief corresponds to the long-standing social myth of the "clean" *Wehrmacht*, whose members, unlike those of the SS, were supposedly not implicated in dishonourable crimes.[14]

14 An exhibition and publication by the Hamburg Institute of Social Research entitled "A War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht" have contributed to calling this myth into question in Germany to some extent (Heer & Naumann, 1995). The exhibition has traveled to several cities in Germany and has unleashed innumerable controversies.